

## STEPWELL OF VANZARI, MODASA AS AN ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF NATHA SECT

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### ABSTRACT

*In ancient times, tourism as we know it today did not exist, so people used to travel on foot. To quench the thirst of these travelers, a noble act called "Punya" was performed, where local nobles, Shethiyas (merchants), ministers, kings, queens, and others constructed water reservoirs to provide drinking water. These water structures included ponds, tanks, and stepwells (Pandya 2019). Among them, stepwells were a special type of hydro-architecture designed to store water.*

*While the world is familiar with famous stepwells like Rani Ki Vav, Adalaj Stepwell, Rudabai Stepwell in Ahmedabad, and Helical Stepwell in Champaner, there is a lesser-known stepwell called Vanzari Stepwell in Modasa, located in the Aravalli district. This research aims to study the historical significance of Vanzari Stepwell and raise awareness about its cultural and architectural importance on a global scale.*

**Keywords:** Vanzari Stepwell, Stepwell, Modasa, Arvalli, Natha Sect, L-Shaped Stepwell, Architectural Heritage

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Preface

Throughout ancient times, numerous rulers have governed Gujarat, each leaving behind a legacy of impressive monuments. Among these structures, stepwells hold a significant place, constructed both for the well-being of society and as enduring memorials of their reigns. Notably, even traders and Vanjaras, who were prominent communities, contributed to the construction of stepwells. Dr. Kumarpal Parmar, a renowned historian, observed that in India, "Stepwell is an entry point to escape from the dreary external world and venture into a delightful world" (Nimishaben 2023: 9-12). Stepwells serve as a focal point in this tradition.

Modasa is a town and municipality located in the Aravalli district of the Indian state of Gujarat. The town's name, Modasa, is derived from the Bhil chieftain Malaji Bhil, who ruled the region in 1466. In a significant development, Modasa was chosen as the headquarters of the newly formed Aravalli district, which was separated from Sabarkantha. The declaration of the new district took place on 26th January 2013, and it officially came into existence on 15th August 2013. The research conducted on Modasa involved fieldwork and observation, which are vital components of historical research, along with other important tools used at Vanzari Stepwell and in this region.

### 2. Meaning of Stepwell

Stepwells are often commonly understood as wells with steps. However, in Hindu Vastushastra, the traditional Hindu architecture, there is a distinction between a regular well and a stepwell. The stepwell is referred to as "Vaapi" in Gujarati and "Vaapikaa" in Sanskrit texts. In the Gujarati language, it is called "Vaav," and if it is of a smaller size, it is known as "Vaavadi." (Parmar, 2022: 5-8)

### 3. Objectives of the Research

- To reveal the stepwell architecture as historical evidence.
- To analyse the historical significance of Vanzari Stepwell of Modasa.
- To analyse the architecture, sculptures as an evidence of Natha Sect.

### 4. Construction, Location and Nomenclature

The Vanzari Stepwell, also known as Vanzari stepwell, is located on the Ahmedabad-Modasa road, approximately 8 minutes away from the Modasa bus station. It can be found on the left side of the police station in the northern direction. Local residents have been referring to it as Vanzari since its inception. According to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the stepwell was constructed by the Vanjaras during the 15th century AD, hence its name, Vanzari Stepwell (Parmar, 2022: 1-4).

The sculptures found in the stepwell provide strong evidence of the influence of the Nath sect. This suggests that the construction of the stepwell might have been carried out by a significant figure associated with the Nath cult.

### 5. Type and Direction of the Stepwell

The Stepwell is classified into four main types based on architecture and Hindu Vastushastra. These types are as follows:

1. Nanda: This type has a single entrance known as Ekmukhi vav.
2. Bhadra: It features two entrances called Dwimukhi Vav.
3. Jaya: This type has three entrances known as Trimukhi Vav.
4. Vijaya: This type comprises four entrances and is referred to as Chaumukhi Vav.

Apart from these traditional classifications, stepwells have been categorized by renowned historians, archaeologists, and architects into other types, such as:

1. Saptamukhi Vav: Stepwells with seven entrances.
2. L-shaped Stepwell: Stepwells with a shape resembling the letter "L".
3. Helical Stepwell: Stepwells with a helical (spiral) structure.
4. Bhamtiwali Stepwell: Stepwells with a unique architectural design.
5. Kundvav and Bhammrio Kuvo: Stepwells with distinct characteristics.

An example of a specific Stepwell, the Vanzari Stepwell in Modasa, has one entrance, making it a Nanda type and L-shaped Stepwell. According to Hindu Vastushastra, the entrance of the Vanzari Stepwell is oriented towards the north direction, as per the traditional practice of facing temples towards the east or north direction.

### 6. Vanzari Stepwell and its Sculpture

The Nath sect follows the Yogavidyaparaka Pashupat Shaiva doctrine and reveres Lord Yogeshwar Shiva as the protector of the world. This ancient sect traces its origins back to the 2nd century BC, with references to its ideology found in Patanjali's works. The key figures in the development of the Nath sect include Matsyendranath, Gorakshanath, Jalandharnath, and Krishnapada (Parmar, 2023).

According to the Nath sect, there are nine Naths located in eight directions, with Adinath (Shiva) at the center. Important sculptures from the Hindu and Nath sects can be found in the Vanzari Stepwell (Serde, 2023: 124-127).

- **Navnath:** A pillar stands at the entrance of the stepwell, featuring carvings of the Nine Gurus (members of the Nath Sampraday) known as Navnath. These gurus are Machindranath or Matsyendranath (9th Century), Gorakshanath or Gorakhnath, Jalindranath or Jalindranath, Kanifnath or Kanhoba, Gahininath or Gehininath, Bhartrinath or Bhartarinath or Raja Bhartari or Bhartṛhari, Revananath or Revan Siddh or Kada Siddha or Ravalanath, Charpatinath or Charpatakshnath, and Naganath or Nageshnath. These depictions are arranged in rows on the pillar near the well of the stepwell.
- **Navagraha:** The Navagraha, as per Hinduism and Hindu astrology, are nine heavenly bodies and deities believed to influence human life on Earth. On the second side of the Navnath's pillar, the remnants of Navagraha can be found arranged in rows from right to left. The nine celestial entities are as follows:
  1. Surya, Aditya, or the Sun
  2. Chandra, Soma, or the Moon
  3. Mangala or Mars
  4. Budha or Mercury
  5. Bṛhaspati, Guru, or Jupiter
  6. Shukra or Venus
  7. Shani or Saturn
  8. Rahu
  9. Ketu

This arrangement serves as a significant example of Hindu Vastushastra, the traditional Indian system of architecture and design principles.

- **Naganath or Nageshnath:** The ninth guru of the Nath Sect is depicted on the left wall at the entrance of Vanzari Stepwell. In the depiction, he is shown with Seshnaga on his head and seated on a throne.
- **Saptarishis:** The Stepwell contains a total of 14 pillars, with 3-4 pillars on each side. These pillars are dedicated to the Seven Sages (Svayambhuva Saptarshi) - Kratu, Pulaha, Pulastya, Vashishtha, Atri, Angira, Vasishtha, Mijar, and Marichi. Each of these pillars depicts one of the seven sages. Moreover, other pillars in the Stepwell showcase sculptures of Hindu deities such as Varaha, Hanuman, Varuna, and various musicians, making it a captivating attraction for visitors.
- **Sheshshayi Vishnu:** Lord Vishnu reclines on the Sheshnag (serpent) with the serpent's hood spread over him, depicted as resting in the form of Lord Vishnu on the serpent in the Vaikuntha (heavenly abode), as described in the Vishnu Shloka " वसति विष्णुश्च अनुषु च इति विष्णु" (Vasati Vishweshu Ch Anushu Ch Iti Vishnu), signifying that Vishnu dwells both within and beyond the universe.

- **Ram, Lakshman, and Sita:** Within the left side of the Nagnath niche, there exists an exquisite window adorned with a graceful arch. This window showcases intricate sculptures of Hindu deities Ram, Lakshman, and Sita. In the Nath tradition, Lakshman is considered to be a manifestation of Sheshnag, the cosmic serpent, and is closely associated with Ram.
- **Kamadhenu:** On the side wall and hoods of the resting Vishnu, there are sculpted figures of Ram, Laxman, and Sita, along with Kamadhenu and other goddesses. In Hindu religion, Kamadhenu is revered as a goddess representing the embodiment of music and is also known as 'Surabhi.' Being in the presence of Kamadhenu grants one's desires, making her a symbol of fulfillment.
- **Other Sculptures:** On the side of the reclining Vishnu, there is a cow's eye that holds sculptures of various deities. Due to its fragmented state, it is challenging to identify, and it was discovered in a well.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Situated in Modasa, Aravalli district, the Vanjari Stepwell stands as a remarkable archaeological gem of India. Protected by the Archaeological Survey of India, this site showcases the wealth of the Nath tradition and Hindu deities through its awe-inspiring and intricately crafted stone sculptures. As a testament to India's magnificent architectural heritage, Vanjari Stepwell is a true treasure that proudly exhibits the country's glorious past."

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## FIGURES



Fig.1 Navnatha



Fig.2 Navnatha



Fig.3 Navnatha



Fig.4 Navgraha





Fig.5 Varan



Fig.6 Ram, Lakshmi, and Sita



Fig.7 Kamadhenu



Fig.8 Nagasain or Nagasainath